Emotional and social intelligence competencies: cross cultural implications

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Abstract
Purpose – Continued research on the assessment and development of emotional and social intelligence competencies represents an opportunity to further both theoretical and applied applications of behavioral science to the management of human capital. While the field has continued to expand over the preceding decades, research has often trailed application, especially as it relates to cross-cultural validity. The purpose of this introductory essay to this special issue of CCM serves to focus on cultural issues related to applied use of competencies in diverse cultures.

Design/methodology/approach – Emotional and social intelligence competencies are defined and an overview provided for the papers that will follow, with original research linking these constructs to performance in various occupations and cultures, as well as issues related to their development.

Findings – Emotional and social intelligence competencies are found to represent a practical and theoretically coherent, reliable and valid approach to assessing and developing individuals in diverse cultures.

Research limitations/implications – As an introductory essay, the paper lays the foundation for the following articles in this special issue.

Originality/value – Although competencies are in widespread use around the world, issues related to cross-cultural validation are seldom studied empirically. This introductory essay and subsequent articles will help clarify emotional and social competencies as a behavioral approach to applying emotional intelligence to the practical needs of organizations.

Keywords Competences, Management development, Management skills, Assessment, Emotional intelligence, Cross cultural validity

Paper type Viewpoint

Over the last 40 years the concept of competency, and the evolving area of emotional and social intelligence competencies (ESC), has evolved into a flexible framework for the selection, assessment and development of human talent in organizations all over the world (Boyatzis et al., 2000; Boyatzis, 2008, 2009; Boyatzis and Ratti, 2009). While growth in the application of competencies to applied issues in today’s global organizations continues to be robust, sound research continues to be needed to ensure the validity and utility of these constructs across diverse cultures and job roles. Additionally, theory and research from affective neuroscience has increasingly been integrated into modern competency theory, assessment and development.
Given the fact that national culture can have a significant impact on the context in which job roles are executed, the issue of cross-cultural validity has become an important issue for researchers interested in ESC. National culture is expected to impact several aspects of the organizational environment altering the economic, political, social, environmental and religious context in which individuals operate. In addition, multi-national corporations have an interest in developing people who come from and work in many cultures. How this impacts the assessment and development of ESC will be the subject of this special issue.

The search for measurable constructs to aid in the prediction and development of work performance has been a core focus of industrial/organizational psychology for over 100 years and will likely continue into the foreseeable future. The development and refinement of traditional intelligence testing has its origins in the desire to predict meaningful outcomes in life, school and work. While the contribution of intelligence, as traditionally defined, has been an important one, its contribution to understanding meaningful outcomes has not been equal across all spheres. As Sternberg (2007, p. 16) notes:

Generally, there is more overlap between the kinds of competences and expertise required on intelligence tests and in schooling than between those required on intelligence tests and in job performance.

This observation would seem to be confirmed by a recent meta-analysis of 151 empirical studies examining the relationship between intelligence and leadership effectiveness that found “[...] results suggest that the relationships between intelligence and leadership is considerably lower than previously thought” (Judge et al., 2004, p. 542). Such findings have stimulated research and interest into alternative theories and methods of assessment which might better predict leadership and job performance.

Another approach taken to applied assessment in organizations has been the use of personality measures based on the Big 5 personality traits of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Many researchers have cast doubt on whether ESC offer anything conceptually different from traditional measures of personality (McCrae, 2000; Newsome et al., 2000; Daus and Ashkanasy, 2003; Zeidner et al., 2004; Bastian et al., 2005). However, research on the correlation between self-reported competencies using the emotional competency inventory (ECI: Boyatzis, Goleman, and HayGroup) and the NEO-PI-R (Costa and McCrae, 1992) showed low correlations between the constructs. Research using the others’ ratings of emotional and social competencies found even lower correlations between Big 5 personality constructs and ESC (Guillén et al., 2009).

In this sense, divergent validity seems to be emerging between ESC and traditional measures of personality. This should not be surprising given the different assessment methods, origins and aims of traditional personality assessments when compared to ESC. Where the former seeks to understand traits of individuals, the later assumes that behavior is driven by motives, largely beneath conscious awareness (Boyatzis, 2008, 2009; Boyatzis and Kelner, 2010).

Combined with multiple studies which demonstrate relatively low correlations between self-reported competencies and competencies rated by others, the competency concept lends support to the notion that individuals will likely not have accurate
insight into their own actual competencies and probably even less insight into the motives that drive these competencies. It also serves to differentiate competencies from traditional personality constructs which rely heavily of self-report measurement strategies. Another key factor which differentiates competencies from more traditional personality measures is the specific focus on predicting work performance versus a more general desire to theorize and assess global personality constructs for a more general understanding of an individual’s psychological makeup. This specific focus on the workplace helps add to the practical utility of ESC.

While it is likely that both traditional personality characteristics (e.g. Big 5) and ESC will be helpful in understanding work performance, the ultimate question becomes, if specific constructs are uncorrelated or, have a low correlation which conceptual framework is a better predictor of relevant criteria? Recent research suggests that ESC are more powerful predictors of performance than global personality measures (Guille´n et al., 2009). Such findings are supportive of the criterion validity of ESC reported by others (Boyatzis, 1982, 2006; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; McClelland, 1998; Goleman, 1998; Dulewicz et al., 2003; Boyatzis and Ratti, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009) and is in contrast to other commentary in the field of emotional intelligence which frames emotional and social intelligence as equivalent to existent personality constructs (McCrae, 2000; Newsome et al., 2000; Bastian et al., 2005).

As research continues to accumulate, what is becoming more apparent is that personality and traditional measures of intelligence leave much of the variance in work performance unexplained (Cherniss, 2001). Moreover, the traditional framing of intelligence and personality as static entities which are “fixed” at a relatively early age, would seem to limit their application to a relatively narrow range of HR applications (e.g. selection and succession planning) (Ryan et al., 2009), since there relatively “fixed” nature would make development extremely difficult or impossible. Whereas competencies represent a set of individual constructs which can be developed and account for a substantial and important amount of variance in work performance (Boyatzis, 2008; Cherniss, 2010; Riggio, 2010). While significant progress is being made in understanding how ESC relate to other constructs, our understanding of the cultural implications of these competencies has only just begun.

This special issue of Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal seeks to illustrate the utility and cross-cultural validity of ESC as an organizing framework for the management of talent in organizations in diverse cultures and builds on previous works dedicated to this topic (Emmerling et al., 2008 and Journal of Management Development 2009 special issue on competencies in the European Union). We also seek to highlight how research methods using both qualitative and quantitative methods in diverse cultures can add to our understanding and inform applied practice.

Since specific competencies have always been understood to predict performance best when they align with the job demands and the organizational environment (see Boyatzis (1982, 2008, 2009) for review), of which national culture is an important part, it is expected that specific competencies will be more central to performance in some jobs and cultures versus others. Whether specific competencies represent universal predictors of job performance remains an issue of debate within the field.

The challenge is to better understand how culture interacts with emotional and social intelligence to drive performance. It is also crucial to understand
how interventions and assessment methods work in diverse cultures. This understanding will likely be best achieved by tempering our desire to generalize theory with a recognition of the theoretical and practical issues which arise as theories attempt to span international borders (Emmerling, 2008). Addressing these critical issues will require that researchers embrace a wider view of assessment methodologies which employ both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

What are emotional and social intelligence competencies?
The desire to find a flexible framework which could account for additional variance in work performance can be seen as the driving force in the modern competency movement. McClelland (1973) in the early 1970s set out to establish such a framework with the publication of his foundational article “Testing for competence instead of intelligence”. Since the publication of this article the word “competency” has been defined in many different ways, which has often served to cause confusion in both research and practice (Ryan et al., 2009; Young and Dulewitz, 2009).

With this being the case, for the purposes of this special issue we build on a general definition of a competency as a capability or ability that leads to or causes effective performance (McClelland, 1973, 1985; Boyatzis, 1982, 2008). In this tradition, competencies represent related but different sets of behavior organized around an underlying construct called the “intent”. The behaviors are alternate manifestations of the intent, as appropriate in various situations or times. For example, listening to someone and asking him or her questions are several behaviors. A person can demonstrate these behaviors for multiple reasons or to various intended ends. A person can ask questions and listen to someone to ingratiate him or herself or to appear interested, thereby gaining standing in the other person's view. Or a person can ask questions and listen to someone because he or she is genuinely interested in understanding this other person, his or her priorities, or thoughts and feelings in a given situation. The latter would be considered a demonstration of empathy, as the underlying intent it to understand the person. Meanwhile, the former underlying reason for the questions is to gain standing or impact in the person's view, elements which would be considered key to the competence of influence. Similarly, the intent of a more subtle competency like emotional self-awareness is self-insight and self-understanding.

Modern competency theory has also been enriched by the integration of theory and research on emotions, motivation, and the field of neuroscience to provide a more holistic theory of competencies that are predictive of organizational outcomes. More recently Boyatzis (2009) has framed competencies as a behavioral approach to emotional intelligence. Using the label ESC in order to make a more explicit link between neuro-endocrine systems associated with clusters of emotional and social competencies and the neuro-endocrine systems involved in the use of cognitive competencies (Boyatzis and Sala, 2004).

The use of the word “intelligence” within the label ESC also serves to highlight key aspects of these constructs. The literature contains multiple definitions of “intelligence”, however we believe that for any construct to be labeled an “intelligence” the concept should be (adapted from Boyatzis (2009) with the addition of the last bullet):
Since the historical development of the theory of competence has always been focused specifically within the domain of work performance, the integration of emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies provides a parsimonious and theoretically coherent framework for organizing the assessment and development of talent in the workplace. Goleman (1998) defined an “emotional competence” as a “learned capability based on emotional intelligence which results in outstanding performance at work.” Combining this definition with the traditional definition of competency as an “underlying characteristic of the person that leads to or causes effective or superior performance” (Boyatzis, 1982), then Boyatzis (2009) claimed that:

- An emotional intelligence competency is an ability to recognize, understand, and use emotional information about oneself that leads to or causes effective or superior performance.
- A social intelligence competency is the ability to recognize, understand and use emotional information about others that leads to or causes effective or superior performance.
- A cognitive intelligence competency is an ability to think or analyze information and situations that leads to or causes effective or superior performance.

The fact that ESC are “learned capabilities based on emotional intelligence which results in superior performance” is an important distinction as it helps to highlight a key issue essential to the prediction of work performance. Possession of a specific ability is not a guarantee that the ability will be demonstrated with adequate frequency or in appropriate situations which would allow it to enhance performance. For example, a person can demonstrate expertise on an ability measure which assesses their ability to recognize emotions in others, yet that person may not be motivated to apply this skill in a conflict situation. Instead they may choose to focus their attention on non-interpersonal aspects of the conflict (e.g. the content of the conflict) and completely ignore the emotions of others engaged in the conflict. It is for this reason that competency assessment needs to take into account much more than mere ability related to specific behaviors, but also have a method to assess how frequently an individual would actually display these behaviors on the job.

Having a theoretical link to motivational systems separates the specific theory of ESC from pure “ability-based” models of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1997).
and may help account for the additional variance accounted for by ESC when compared to ability-based models of emotional intelligence. Even proponents of ability-based models of emotional intelligence have conceded that broader definitions of emotional intelligence may have enhanced applied utility in comparison to the more narrow definition of ability-based models (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2005). The applied utility of a broader definition of emotional intelligence is supported by a recent meta-analysis which found that “mixed models” of emotional intelligence (which would include ESC) where predictive of performance across a wide range of occupations, while the predictive power of ability-based measures of emotional intelligence were inconsistent, often better able to predict performance in jobs higher in emotional labor (O’Boyle et al., 2010). From a practical standpoint such findings support the utility of using a competency-based approach to provide a more comprehensive set of constructs based on a more comprehensive theoretical framework that more fully reflect the behavioral range required across a broad spectrum of occupations and links explicitly to a theory of motivation.

As cognitive psychology has evolved, it has become more apparent that information processing can be conducted through various structures, some of which operate outside of conscious awareness. Moreover, research within social psychology has illuminated the fact that attitudes can be processed implicitly (i.e. non-consciously) and can become dissociated from conscious attitudes (Devine, 1981). Neuropsychologists have known for several decades that the brain is made up of several systems capable of becoming disassociated with one another, each having different relationships to observed behavior. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Spangler (1992) found that operant assessment of motives correlated better with behavioral patterns over time. In other words, assessments of unconscious motives give better insight into how people will respond in unstructured situations (i.e. a better approximation of the “real world”), especially if suitable task incentives are present. Whereas assessments of motives using respondent measures prove more predictive of situations where the decision field is limited to specific responses (e.g. other respondent measures).

A better understanding of psychological constructs that can be correlated with organizational outcomes requires that we better understand how conscious values and unconscious traits and motives interact with biological systems to lead to specific behavioral patterns and tendencies. Such a comprehensive theory was first synthesized by Boyatzis et al. (2000) and Boyatzis (2008) to provide a more integrated understanding of how physiological, psychological and observed behavior interacts. This theory of personality is shown in Figure 1. The theory incorporates and predicts the relationship among a person’s:

- neural circuits and endocrine (i.e. hormonal) processes;
- unconscious dispositions referred to as motives and traits;
- values and operating philosophy;
- specific observed competencies; and
- competency clusters.

The link between behavior and neuroscience has generated a great deal of excitement and early research shows great promise in establishing a more integrated theory of personality. For example, prior research has demonstrated the arousal of an individual's power
motive causes and is affected by arousal of his or her sympathetic nervous system (Boyatzis et al., 2006). When the power motive is aroused individuals are more likely to display behavioral competencies theoretically linked to the power motive, specifically influence, inspirational leadership or change catalyst (Winter et al., 1981; McClelland, 1985). Better understanding the neuroscience of leadership both from the perspective of the brain chemistry of leaders and how they influence the neuro chemistry, and over longer periods, possibly the neuro anatomy of those they lead represents a truly exciting avenue for future research (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). Such an approach has the potential to produce basic findings which may prove to be generalizable across cultures.

**Emerging challenges for cross-cultural research**

Although the field of competencies is now over 40 years old and the newer field of emotional intelligence approaches its 20th year, scholarly interest in cross-cultural issues has only more recently begun to emerge. Of the many questions which could potentially be raised, we consider three questions to be the most relevant for future research and applications: measurement issues related to culture, cross-cultural validity, and the development of emotional and social intelligence competencies.

*Measurement issues related to culture*

Central to the practical application of psychological theories to the workplace is the issue of assessment and measurement. The framing of competencies as requiring action (i.e. a set of alternate behaviors varying according to the situation) and intent calls for measurement strategies that demonstrate the presence of specific behaviors and allows for the inference of the intent behind those behaviors. The measurement of strength or frequency that a given competency is displayed is also critical to understanding if the competency is displayed with appropriate frequency while the individual actually goes about executing his or her role.
Preliminary work to establish an initial framework of competencies was done inductively using criterion samples of average and superior performers to understand which competencies were “threshold”, meaning that both average and superior job performers both exhibit the competency in roughly the same frequency, and which were “distinguishing” competencies, those competencies only demonstrated, more frequently demonstrated or demonstrated in a more sophisticated way by superior performers (Boyatzis, 1982). The exploratory nature of this early work necessitated the use of more inductive research methods to identify and document specific competencies.

To collect this behavioral data, a modification of Flanagan’s (1954) critical incident technique was adapted using the inquiry sequence from the thematic apperception test and the focus on specific events in one’s life from the biodata method (Dailey, 1971). This modified version of the critical incident technique asked people to describe in great narrative detail specific incidents in which they felt effective as well as incidents when they felt ineffective. These critical incident interviews are then transcribed and coding using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify specific competencies and their corresponding frequency.

The more frequently a person is coded for demonstrating a competency, for example, empathy, the more confident we become that empathy is a competency that the person would tend to use frequently as they go about executing their current or future roles. Since interviewers are trained to probe interviewees in a way that often highlights the intent of given behaviors, we have an assessment methodology capable of capturing all three elements ideal for competency assessment:

1. presence of specific behaviors;
2. the intention related to specific behaviors; and
3. the frequency that the competency was displayed.

The method of using critical incident interviews and other competency assessment techniques with criterion referenced samples has been used in several studies to establish the validity of ESC in a variety of cultures (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2000; Day and Carroll, 2004; Spencer et al., 2007f, 2008; Boyatzis and Ratti, 2009; Ryan et al., 2009). The use of qualitative methodologies and thematic analysis can produce data appropriate for further statistical analysis, while at the same time allowing a high level of cultural sensitivity. Such sensitivity to cultural context is especially critical as researchers attempt to establish the validity of ESC in diverse cultures.

As frameworks for emotional and social competencies began to develop and be validated, it become feasible to employ additional measurement methodologies to the assessment of ESC. Perhaps, one of the most popular methodologies involves the use of multi-rater assessment or 360° feedback. However, where techniques which employ thematic analysis of qualitative data (e.g. critical incident interviews, group tasks and simulations) allow the opportunity to maintain a degree of sensitivity to the cultural context in which competencies are manifest, questionnaire-based methodologies often require a degree of care to ensure the validity of interpretations across cultures.

Once respondent measures are developed and used, issues of cultural compatibility and cross-cultural meaning arise as potential challenges to validity and interpretation. The issue becomes especially critical when translating the questionnaire into...
different languages and using it with people with different cultural backgrounds (Batista-Foguet et al., 2008). Separate from the issue of accurate translation, is an assessment as to the degree to which items and constructs have an equivalent meaning for individuals of different cultural backgrounds (Little, 1997; Cheung and Rensvold, 1999).

Potential problems can arise from cultural interpretation of the behavior being assessed as well as cultural appropriateness of the behavior being shown. For example, is the competency of “initiative” (highly valued in the USA) equally valued and seen in positive terms in other cultures? Research by Batista-Foguet et al. (2008, 2009) found that, for at least some emotional and social competencies, issues related to factorial invariance suggest that not all comparisons between different cultural samples can be viewed as equivalent. Selected competencies revealed a problem with comparability which may have arisen from translation problems, cultural interpretation of the behavior being assessed, cultural appropriateness (i.e. degrees of good versus bad) of the behavior being shown, or a meaningful difference in the frequency of using these competencies in different cultures.

Thus, comparisons between countries based on the usage of questionnaires require a step frequently omitted. Prior to computing and interpreting any result of a cross-cultural comparison, it is crucial to assess the degree to which items and the measured constructs have the same meaning for the respondents of the different groups to be compared (Little, 1997; Cheung and Rensvold, 1999).

While multi-rater and other respondent methodologies will continue to provide important insights into the cross-cultural aspects of ESC, such research methodologies will need to be balanced with more qualitative measures for competencies that require more contextual interpretation (Emmerling, 2008; Batista-Foguet et al., 2008; Cherniss, 2010) or which may be unique to certain cultures (Spencer et al., 2007).

Cross-cultural validity
The competency or behavioral approach to EI and SI was originally derived inductively from performance. As research continued in several countries and cultures, the same or similar competencies began to emerge repeatedly as valid predictors of performance (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Yet, slight differences in theoretical approaches, definitions and methods in the published literature make direct comparisons more difficult.

Some argue that what distinguishes high performing leaders is somewhat universal across cultures (Wolff, 2008; Ryan et al., 2009). Others make the case for a more cautious approach which views national culture as a key variable which effects which competencies will most directly link to measures of work performance.

The issue becomes even more complex given the various measures of performance used. The dependent variables in some studies use indirect measures of performance (e.g. performance ratings) while others use direct measures of relevant criteria (e.g. business unit profitability, objective sales performance, employee turnover, etc.). Moreover, work performance is a multi-dimensional construct. It is probable that some competencies are likely to correlate more strongly with some criterion than others. For example, are the specific competencies which link to business unit profitability the same competencies which correlate most strongly with a lower rate of qualified turnover of employees? The relatively broad notion of performance has clouded the issue of the link between ESC and performance. Future researchers should attempt to assess
performance in a multi-dimensional manner so that specific constructs can be linked to specific facets of work performance.

Specific studies demonstrate that role and culture may result in some competencies being more predictive of performance. Yet, cultural relativism would suggest that competencies may take slightly different form given the specific culture under study. For example, the specific behaviors associated with influence may differ slightly between different cultures, but it is hard to imagine a leadership role in any culture in which a leader’s ability to influence others is not related to their performance.

This has led many researchers conducting applied research in several different cultures to conclude that the distinguishing competencies which predict performance tend to be universal (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Wolff, 2008; Ryan et al., 2009). The table below lists the articles included in this special issue listing the countries, roles, specific ECS models used, as well methods used in assessment. As can be seen in the table, multiple research methodologies have been employed which represent a mix of respondent and operant methods. The inclusion of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in research on ESC in the workplace has been advocated by researchers (Boyatzis, 1998; Emmerling, 2008; Cherniss, 2010) to ensure that research methods remain open to and sensitive to contextual issues related to the constructs under investigation.

Although much has been written about how to develop emotional intelligence competencies in the workplace, few positive evaluation studies of EI-related programs have been published within peer-reviewed academic journals, although some notable exceptions are Slaski and Cartwright (2002), Cherniss et al. (2010) and Gignac et al. (2012, current issue). While the results of this research are generally positive, the populations under study all represent “Western cultures” (i.e. the UK, the USA and Australia). What has yet to emerge in the literature are rigorous program evaluations from outside the west. A key question which remains for the field is the issue of how culture might interact with the development of ESC. Specifically, can we generalize specific methods and techniques to diverse cultures or will some methods need to be adapted to take culture into account.

The articles that have been included in this special issue of CCM attempt to speak to some of these central issues. While the amount of articles that can be included in this issue is limited, these articles build on previous efforts in the field to stimulate the dissemination of research which can shed light on cultural issues related to ESC. Table I lists previous articles and book chapters which have recently appeared that address cross-cultural issues, while Table II provides an overview of the articles included in the current issue.

### Conclusion

The domain of social and emotional intelligence represents a useful and valid approach to the management of human capital in today’s modern global workplace. The growing body of research on ESC provides support for the notion of the relationship to performance as universal. However, additional research is needed to strengthen our belief in the universality of ESC as well as investigate the possibility of specific behavioral manifestations of ESC being partially dependent on culture. Additional research will also be needed to validate specific techniques for developing ESC across diverse cultures.
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Table II. Studies included in the current special issue of Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal.
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